

Review on *Whores for Gloria* by William T. Vollmann for *The Village Voice Literary Supplement*

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WHORES FOR GLORIA

By William T. Vollmann

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Having already published a short story collection and two fat novels distinguished as much for their whopping assemblages of arcane data as for their flights of casually incandescent prose, William Vollmann, at the tender age of 32, bids fair to become our very own Diderot—a fleet Encyclopedist of the Information Age who writes with equal diagnostic fire on postcolonial politics, punk rockers, electricity, bugs, and Viking history. His fictions, needless to say, lack the moral suavity of that elegant, over-worked Frenchman. Moreover, Vollmann's work, unlike that of his direct predecessor Thomas Pynchon, appears essentially indifferent to the traditional craft of the novelist: the creation of characters; Instead of the weights and measures of a stable ethical universe grounded in recognizable, pronoun-wearing creations, we get the weird gamma-ray bombardment of Vollmann's enormously retentive memory- an enfilade of erudition beneath which the narrative, as often as not, groans. His ambition is huge (he is currently writing a seven-volume history of America, beginning with the Vikings), but his work, despite the often beautiful sentences, had until recently something weightless about its Hash, a little like those carbide cannon toys of childhood which, though they make a tremendous boom, have little propulsive force.

And yet Vollmann is proving more complex than he at first appeared. He is turning out, miracle of miracles, to be a genuine writer- a fact demonstrated not only by his enormous output (a rough gauge of sincerity in and of itself) but by his latest volume, a slim, touching, wonderfully uncharacteristic novel entitled *Whores for Gloria*.

Set in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, the book records the boozy peregrinations of a middle-aged stumblebum alcoholic, Jimmy, whose fall into decrepitude is wound around the axis of his obsession with his long-gone lover, a prostitute named Gloria. His love for her is deathless, Shakespearean, a gleaming chalice he carries above the squalor of his life. Unable to forget, he attempts to reconstruct her- reminiscing endlessly about her in local bars, searching for her in the hard, scarred bodies of other prostitutes. "Whenever Jimmy needed the smell of a woman or the soft weight of a woman's embrace, why, he had the whores being themselves for Gloria who partook of them all and lived on them all like some sky-goddess feasting upon the smoke from sacrifices."

Disturbingly, he at a certain point gathers hair from the head of a hooker and makes of it a Gloria-wig which he requests the girls wear while he fucks them, “as if through some combination of hubris and sincerity he could construct, however momentarily, his own charnel-Gloria like some Frankenstein’s monster lying in his bed and listening for him with black girls’ and white girls’ ears in its patchwork face.”

Vollmann deftly strews the path of his narrative with vignettes, offering us sharp vérité. Glances into the lives of the half-dozen hookers, bums, and pimps who cross Jimmy’s path. The prose, beneath its bright modernist mantle, has an earned, J Bukowski-style of hard knocks to it—evidence, if any is needed, that Vollmann did not write this book from reading up on losers in a wood-paneled library. The time he doubtless spent among subjects, and the intricate sympathy he established with them as a result, are an essential part of his achievement.

Not much happens in the book, and yet the lack of narrative movement never palls. Somebody buys somebody else a drink. Somebody, for no particular reason, bursts into tears. It’s not all especially connected and it doesn’t matter. *Whores for Gloria* has the fat-free power-to-weight ratio of a hummingbird, and the gradually thickening atmosphere provides a satisfying sense of forward motion. Meditating on the shape-shifting powers or grief, on loyalty, and on the pockets of sweetness still to be found in the far reaches of the dark, Vollmann flexes muscles few suspected he had and pulls off a quiet coup. Score one for art.

—Eli Gottlieb